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Bridge Facts

Introduction

The 1920s inspired those with courage or hard cash (or connections to it) to forge a world that only superlatives could describe. The “War to end the powers of politics, science and industry to erase man-kind’s other ills were in evidence:

- Women had the vote
- “devil rum” was shackled
- Two army pilots flew across America non-stop in less than 27 hours
- Now, more Americans lived in cities than on farms (after all, they had seen Paree’)
- Jack Benny and Eddie Cantor commanded vaudeville, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O’Neill, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Shakespeare enriched our literature
- Knute Rockne’s “Four Horsemen” dominated college gridirons, and the National Football League was formed.
- The world’s first commercial radio station, Detroit’s 8MK (now WWJ), went on the air, and a patent was sought for an electronic transmitter.

A gay, glorious era for flappers, marathon dances and singing, “Yes, We Have No Bananas”. The Teapot Dome oil scandal and the re-emergence of Prohibition forced to compete with the popularity of Babe Ruth and Winnie-the-Pooh. A clumsy attempt to overthrow the German government, the Beer Hall Putsch, and the political escapade of an eccentric malcontent, Adolph Hitler.

This was also a time for building. Detroit’s Penobscot Building, the General Motors Building, the Fisher Building, the Detroit Public Library, the I Greenfield Village, Masonic Auditorium, the Buhl Building and Police Headquarters on Beaubien were only part of the construction that was re-

of the Detroit Graphite Company, and his aim was to secure a contract to paint such a bridge as might, inevitably, span the Detroit River. Their remarkable accomplishment – a \$23.5 million, privately financed link between the United States and Canada. As the two men met above the dir and crowds, they talked of heavy construction and high finance. They could not have foreseen their role in a most curious event in Detroit's hist



Efforts in vain

The development of Great Lakes shipping, inaugurated by French trappers three centuries before, intensified in the industrial age with the dem resources of the region. In 1872, the Great Western Railway sent a survey team to Detroit to test the feasibility of a drawbridge, but well-estab and the ferry boatmen thwarted the plan.

Every conceivable site after that triggered a proposition for a bridge: across Belle Isle, a span from Woodward Avenue to Windsor. The Detroit I formed an International Bridge Committee in 1903. Canada's Border Cities were also anxious to derive the benefits of a link with Detroit.

Fowler's Fiasco

Shortly after World War I, a prominent New York civil engineer, Charles Evan Fowler, came forward with a proposal to build a bridge that would street cars and pedestrians. He organized two companies in the early 1920s – the Canadian Transit Company and the American Transit Compar support of both Parliament and Congress for his franchise. His plans, though, were too ambitious. The rail approaches for the \$28 million struct inland. Public guarantees for the financing would be needed. Its 110-foot center height would give only marginal clearance for shipping. But stil bridge. At this point, Russell T. Scott organized an investment scheme for Fowler's project that not only failed to get the bridge financed, but dev own money. Among Fowler's most-ardent supporters was John W. Austin. Determined that the river would be spanned, he approached C. J. Ma McClintic – Marshall Company, a noted Pittsburgh engineering firm, to adopt the project. It was Marshall who arranged Austin's introduction tc banker with a record for snatching success from the jaws of defeat.





Bower vs. Smith – The First Encounter

After studying the finances and construction of bridge projects in this country and in Europe, Bower took up the project late in 1924, purchasing the Canadian and American Transit companies (primarily because of the government authorizations). He appointed John Austin treasurer, retail engineer and build the bridge, and began securing the necessary endorsements from approving agencies and public bodies.

Negotiating any bureaucracy can be intimidating. Joseph Bower was merely proposing to build the longest suspension bridge in the world. It is a testament to his proposal was accepted by the: President of the United States, Governor -General of Canada, U.S. War Department, Canadian Minister of Railways, Province of Ontario, Lake Carriers Association, Dominion Marine Association, Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Waterways Commission and the Great Lakes Shipping Commission, in addition to the already-held approvals from the U.S. Congress and the Canadian Parliament. And on top of this, Bower arranged to gain these approvals, Bower applied to local authorities for their consent. The town of Sandwich, Ontario, quickly concurred. Essex County, Ontario, held a referendum in which the bridge project was approved by the voters.

In Detroit, an objection that the proposed bridge's 135-foot clearance would limit future navigation was overcome after some protracted discussion. The bridge 152 feet above the Detroit River. Thereupon, the Detroit Common Council unanimously approved the bridge's construction.



But Detroit Mayor John W. (Johnny) Smith had yet to assert his authority. He cast his veto. The Council overrode it, and he countered in Wayne County with a petition for a restraining order, blocking progress on the bridge until a popular referendum could be held. Presumably, Joseph Bower and John W. Smith perhaps they recalled their first meeting several years before. They had come so far. The financing was in hand. The plans were drawn. The authorities

Battle Lines

Mayor Smith's opposition to the bridge was not totally capricious. He argued that, ultimately, the bridge's users would pay for its cost and debt service through a perpetual profit to its owners.

Smith faced re-election, and at the time needed to assert his position as a champion of the electorate. His ally, powerful Robert (Wildflower) Oa competition for his real estate activities in northwest Detroit from the direction of southwest Ontario. But the pair might have gauged their opp Bower knew that his support among the citizenry was as solid as the planned bedrock foundation of his bridge. Detroit's political and business l to the project. With customary thoroughness, every objection had been refuted or resolved. Bower declined to fight Smith in court. With bravac the estimated \$50,000 cost of the referendum.

The issue became a publisher's bonanza. Full-page advertisements darkened newsprint in Detroit with charges and counterclaims. Smith and O greed of the "Barons of Wall Street"; the signatures of Detroit's first citizens were affixed in public support of the proposition; even merchants c motto: "Build the Bridge". Public meeting fueled private debates. John Lodge, then a member of the Common Council, became a leading support his mayoral candidacy enhanced.

The Essesltyn Affair

Finally, the eve of the election, Mayor Smith took to the airwaves for a final condemnation of the proposal. It proved his undoing.

As Smith was leaving the studio, he encountered H. H. Esselstyn, a highly respected engineer on the Belle Isle Bridge works, and, at the time, Co Railways. Esselstyn was about to broadcast a statement favorable to the bridge interests. Smith fired him on the spot. The professional was stur vengeance. Nonetheless, he spoke into the microphone with a calm suited to his considered technical opinions, as he had prepared to do. Then, ; sentence: "I want all Detroiters to know that because I have made this short speech, I have been discharged as Commissioner of Street Railways



Victory

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Construction

Construction had actually begun a month and a half before the referendum. Congress had ruled that construction would have to begin by May 1 if the franchise would expire. Hoping that Congress would regard boring operations as a meaningful start of construction, Bower staged ceremonies in 1927 with his 1-year-old daughter Helen driving the first boring stake into the ground to determine the depth of the bedrock.



The general contract for construction was signed July 20, 1927, and made operative August 16. McClintic-Marshall was allowed until August 16 to complete the job. If it was not done by that date, the engineering firm would be liable for interest on the securities until the bridge began producing income. If they finished the job in advance of the deadline, they would be entitled to half the revenues between the date the bridge opened and April 16, 1930. On November 11, 1929 – the Ambassador Bridge was ready for operation. McClintic-Marshall had brought the job in one percent.

When the Ambassador Bridge opened for traffic four days later, its almost 21,000 tons of steel rose at never more than a five percent grade to a swift current of the Detroit River. Its 1,850-foot center span made it the longest suspension bridge in the world. Its total length was 7,490 feet between Canadian terminals 1 3/4 miles apart. The roadway was 47 feet wide with an eight-foot-wide sidewalk on the west side. The twin silicon steel cables majestically 386 feet above the ground were built on concrete piers resting on bedrock 115 feet below the surface. Close to two miles of cable with 37 strands, each as big around as a strong man's biceps, each composed of 218 individual sinews of cold drawn, galvanized steel – had been erected and suspended between its two towers were fastened to massive concrete anchorages 22 1/2 feet wide and 100 feet long, sunk into bedrock 105 feet below the surface. Not these cables – were also the most dramatic story of the construction.

The Changing of the Cables

treated wire cables be used instead of the universally used cold drawn steel wire. The new heat-treated wire cables had been tested and found to have tensile strength greater than the cold drawn steel wire used on the Brooklyn Bridge, for example, for 50 years.



These heat-treated wires had been woven strand by strand into the 37 component cables of each of the two massive main cables that would support the suspension bridge, and by mid-February of 1929, the suspenders, like steel harp strings, had been hung from the cables and work had begun to transfer the roadway to the weighted ends of these suspenders. Progress on the Detroit River span was a whole year ahead of schedule.

But the up mood on the Ambassador Bridge turned sharply downward when word reached Detroit on February 22 that a number of broken wire cables of the even more nearly completed Mount Hope Bridge in Rhode Island. This bridge shared with the Ambassador Bridge the distinction of using heat-treated wire instead of cold drawn steel. It came to light that three broken strands had been found near the Bristol, Rhode Island anchorage of the Mount Hope Bridge as early as January of 1929. Subsequent inspection on the Detroit River project revealed a few under any other circumstances, not an all-time high number of broken wires in the Ambassador Bridge's cables.

McClintic-Marshall, the same engineering firm that was building the Mount Hope Bridge, halted work on the Ambassador Bridge on March 1 and hired consultants from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to examine the situation and report. Based on that report, McClintic-Marshall – with Joseph Bower decided to absorb the half-million-dollar expense of removing the cables over the Detroit River and replacing them with time-tested heat-treated wire. When the torches began hissing and the cutters began lopping the enormous cables into manageable lengths and lowering them to the ground, the year that work crews had gained on their three-year contract was hopelessly wiped out. But the old cables were replaced with new in time to have the bridge opened on November 11 – nine months ahead of schedule.

A Hard First Decade

In the next few years, the Ambassador Bridge would be the site for a number of stunts: planes would fly under it, a man would parachute off it, a man would walk backwards, another would push a friend across it in a wheelbarrow, a girl would toe-dance her way across it and couples would marry at the bridge's boundary line. But the 1930s were the antithesis of the rotating '20s.

The opening of the world's longest suspension bridge had been preceded, just 21 days before, by the beginning of the crash of the New York Stock Exchange and the onset of the Great Depression. While almost 200,000 vehicles crossed the Ambassador Bridge during the remaining month and a half of 1929, only 1 million vehicles traveled it the next year, the left jab of the Depression was followed by a quick right cross with the opening of the Detroit & Canada



Financial Problems

Detroit International Bridge Company chairman and President Joseph A. Bower and his general manager, R. Bryce McDougald, former Windsor were faced with a competition for traffic that had not been projected or anticipated when the financial structure for the Bridge was originally planned. The problem was toll rates at the Tunnel much lower than what the Bridge could afford to offer. The competition from the Tunnel and Bridge also forced the Tunnel to slash their rates 52 percent in an unsuccessful attempt to stay afloat.

Default

With traffic over the Ambassador Bridge dipping a half million in 1931, the bottom fell from the economic structure of the Bridge Company. It was in default on its debentures and the first mortgage bonds that year, just two years after it opened. The Tunnel also went into default, and its economic structure collapsed.

As Bridge traffic slipped another quarter million in 1932, committees were established to represent the bondholders. Heavy taxes further crippled the Bridge's ability to right itself financially. In 1932, taxes represented 80 percent of revenue, and continued in the mid – 70 percent range for the next three years. The situation continued to fall through the Depression years. It increased somewhat from 1935 through 1937, aided by an increase in truck traffic encouraged by the December 1937 of a new 20-door Canada Customs warehouse. But the increases in truck traffic were not enough to halt the mounting financial problems of the Bridge Company. By 1936, the accrued interest on the interest debt stood at \$8,199,872 and climbing, in addition to unpaid taxes.

Reorganization

The savior of faltering businesses and bad debts, Joseph A. Bower, was now faced with the toughest challenge of his career: saving his own company. After two years of the decade, he orchestrated a successful reorganization of the Bridge Company. The reorganization went into effect July 1, 1939, and the debentures were exchanged for \$133,089 in common stock by the end of the year, out of a total of 217,175 shares of stock issued at a dollar a share. The Bridge's debt was reduced to \$2,600,000, a property reassessment also reduced Detroit and Wayne County taxes.

War Restrictions

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And with the beginning of the War years, Canada placed strict controls on the movement of any Canadian funds out of the country. Under the F Board, Canadian toll funds were restricted for use in Canada, and stayed with the Canadian Transit Company, the wholly-owned Canadian subsidiary of the International Bridge Company.



In 1941, traffic had increased over that of 1940, despite travel restrictions. The tolls were also increased for the first time since the Bridge's opening in 1929. In 1942, the Bridge cut back on car traffic, but truck volume rose by 12 percent, stimulated this time by a \$21,387 addition to the Canada Customs warehouse. During that year, the bridge's first general manager during its operation, R. Bryce McDougald, died, and was succeeded by C. Clinton Campbell, who was named assistant to the president. Within a year, he was elected vice president and treasurer. In 1946, he was named president, with Bryce as chairman.



Back on Solid Ground

In 1943, revenue from car traffic dropped 24 percent, but truck traffic continued its rise because of the increase in Customs warehouse facilities. In 1944, the first dividend in the history of the Detroit International Bridge Company was paid to shareholders. The 75 cents a share of reorganization, would also be the first of an unbroken stream of dividends paid every year from then on.

The next year, 1945, two dividend distributions were made, totaling \$1.25 a share, when revenues increased by 72 percent and earnings by 140 percent. In 1946, the first dividend in the history of the Detroit International Bridge Company was paid to shareholders. The 75 cents a share of reorganization, would also be the first of an unbroken stream of dividends paid every year from then on.

Post-War Prosperity

A 15 percent increase in traffic and revenue in 1945 and an increased capitalization allowed a 100 percent stock dividend plus a \$1.05 a share dividend. The company started releasing some of the funds held by the Canadian Transit Company to the Detroit International Bridge Company.

Traffic and revenue continued to increase through the Bridge's 20th anniversary year in 1949. In the first 20 years, more than 50 million people crossed the Bridge, providing employment for hundreds in the Customs and Immigration services. Canada Customs duties collected over the years had averaged \$1 million a year, and the average yearly value of commodities imported to the U.S. over the Ambassador Bridge from Canada had been \$30 million.

The 1950s were a decade of continued steady growth in revenue and traffic for the Bridge, aided by boosts to truck traffic spotted throughout the decade. Trucks were allowed to travel to Buffalo through Ontario (1952); a new Customs truck dock on the U.S. side was opened and, on the Canadian side, the dock was enlarged (1953); and in 1955, the Canada Customs warehouse was increased in size by 50 percent.

IMPROVING THE BRIDGE

The closing year of the '50s witnessed the retirement of Bridge founder Joseph A. Bower as chairman, after 30 years at the helm of the Bridge. His chairmanship passed to son Robert, he remained a director and change continued.

The Ambassador Bridge witnessed a repainting of all the toll plaza structures from black to green and white. The glossy black Bridge would have been an experiment in the late 1950s, in which a portion of the span was painted aluminum, found that the heavy downriver pollution quickly covered the bridge with a sooty black.

With cooperation of Detroit and Windsor transportation departments, uniform Ambassador Bridge trailblazer road signs were designed and erected to direct motorists to the Bridge.



Throughout the decade, further physical developments took place: Ammex Duty Free store opened on the U.S. plaza (1963); the office buildings were expanded to provide more space for customs brokers (1964); the Canada Customs office was doubled in size (1966); negotiations that would drag on for a decade resulted in the U.S. Government to enlarge the U.S. plaza (1968); and a large-scale rehabilitation program was begun in 1969, the Ambassador Bridge's 40th anniversary. The program saw the complete rewiring of the Bridge and the installation of new mercury vapor lamps and new electrical transformers.

In 1970, \$850,000 was spent over a period of eight months in repairing the Bridge's roadway. The U.S. approach roadway deck was rehabilitated with concrete and installing a complete asphalt overlay, the first such replacement in the Bridge's 40 years.

The original granite blocks, which had been embedded in sand to provide traction on the U.S. side's five percent grade, were replaced with the asphalt. The granite blocks were given to the Windsor Parks & Recreation Department, and now grace many of the pathways in Windsor parks.

new Ammex distribution and warehouse building on the U.S. terminal. The tower signs were also replaced that year at a cost of \$33,000. Originally, the signs were replaced for the first time in 1952, each tower sign displays the words, “Ambassador Bridge”, in six-foot-high letters.

New secondary car inspection facilities were completed for Canada Customs on the Canadian terminal at a cost of \$360,000 during 1975, and the old area was demolished and replaced with new, enlarged facilities at a cost of \$325,000 the next year. Following an in-depth inspection of the Bridge preventive maintenance program was inaugurated in 1976. The following year, the main cable band bolts were replaced for the first time as part of a preventive maintenance program. The total cost approached \$650,000. In 1974, a new retail sales store for Ammex was built on the U.S. terminal. In 1978, plans were made to install a toll system. But the president and general manager’s plans for expanding the Detroit plaza through adding a new terminal building for U.S. Customs adjacent to the plaza were stalled through the entire decade by the lack of progress in negotiations with the U.S. Government’s General Service Administration. The congestion on the U.S. plaza continued to mount as the decade progressed. By mid-decade, the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce and Wayne County officials had entered into the negotiations to try to untangle the bureaucratic red tape impeding the expansion. In early 1977, the Bridge Company offered to sell a \$1.2 million, 40-door terminal building from a neighboring trucking company with the intent of leasing it to GSA for use by U.S. Customs for truck inspection. The offer was refused, and the Bridge Company then offered to sell the facility to GSA at cost.

The terminal building still sits vacant two years later, waiting for GSA, which prefers to purchase on its own terms. The Bridge Company offered to lease the building without cost to the U.S. Government. GSA has also refused that offer. In contrast, truck examination on the Canadian side has run smoothly for years and was further improved in 1973 when its truck examination area was segregated from the rest of the terminal area.

CHANGES

Expressway Expansion Brings More Traffic

While the two decades of physical improvements on the Bridge were occurring, other developments near the Ambassador Bridge would bring car traffic growth during the '60s and '70s. In 1970, Bridge car traffic started to drop because of the then two-year-old John Lodge Expressway, which bypassed downtown, and consequently, to the Tunnel. It was not until the mid-1960s that work began on construction of a leg of Interstate 75 through the Bridge.

The I-75 stretch from Toledo to the Bridge opened in 1967. And by 1970, I-75 had been completed north of the Bridge through midtown Detroit with a connection with the interstate highway system that was further extended with the construction of a stretch of I-96 near the Bridge giving motorists access to I-75, I-96 and I-94.

On the Canadian side, the City of Windsor and the Province of Ontario rebuilt the four-lane highway leading into the Bridge late in the decade. New parking lots were built on the Bridge terminal to tie into the new highway in 1970. In 1965, two other developments further stimulated use of the Bridge: the opening of the new Windsor Raceway, which caused a heavy increase in truck traffic of new cars and auto parts, and the opening of the new Windsor Raceway. Tolls have been in effect since 1957 when car tolls were established at 60 cents and 10 cents a passenger.

In July 1971, those rates were dropped, and one all-inclusive toll of 75 cents per car, including all passengers, was established. At the same time, the rate of 45 cents and 10 cents per passenger was revised to the all-inclusive rate of 50 cents, with the purchase of a 40-ticket commuter book. This is the effect today, as is the truck rate of 1 cent per hundred pounds, the rate filed with the first toll tariff in 1940.

Changes

In 1965, five years after stepping down as chairman, Joseph A. Bower retired as a director of the Detroit International Bridge Co. He was named chairman five years later, a second son, Joseph W. Bower, was elected to the Board, and succeeded his brother Robert as chairman in 1977. Both served as chairman of the Company. On August 15, 1977, Joseph A. Bower would die in his Florida home at the age of 96.

In the tradition of an earlier time, he “read law” under the judge, and passed the bar examination without a formal education. Determined to gain finance as well, he entered the Detroit Business University.

At the age of 19, young Joseph was hired by the Detroit Trust Company. By 1924, the year Bower actually undertook the Ambassador Bridge project, he was a vice president of J. P. Morgan’s New York Trust Company.

His success was not that of a banker, but of a business man who understood finance. His was the proverbial knack for taking “lemons and making lemonade.” His reputation for converting soured loans into solid accounts bordered on the legendary. Henry Ford turned to him during the Ford Motor Company’s early days.

READY FOR THE FUTURE



The Bower family successfully maintained control of the Ambassador Bridge until 1979. When Joseph A. Bower stepped down as chairman of the Company Board of Directors in 1939, he turned the reins over to his son Robert. Then, in 1979, following the death of Joseph Bower, the family turned over the management of the bridge. On July 31, after two years of negotiations, the Central Cartage Company of Detroit purchased the Ambassador Bridge and operated by the Detroit International Bridge Company.

Central Cartage was owned by a native Detroit family headed by Manuel J. “Matty” Moroun, a successful transportation businessman who recognized the heritage of the bridge and its great potential.

Many appropriate management changes occurred under the leadership of Moroun. Both he and Dan Stamper, current president of the Ambassador Bridge, were looking for the future that involved immediate change and future growth. As much as the Bower family members were financiers and their expertise was in building and early decades of operating the bridge, the 1980s were bringing new and different challenges.

It became apparent that new ideas and approaches were imperative to maintain the bridge’s position as one of the leading border crossings in North America. Dan Stamper provided the imaginative leadership needed to accomplish this. He was an expert on international trade and transportation, and he demonstrated his expertise with local neighborhoods as well as state, federal, and international governments. Furthermore, he understood the needs of the commercial truckers and travelers who used the bridge. And Stamper, also familiar with bridge operations and international trade, has provided the administrative leadership needed for the changes to happen.

As in past decades, the bridge continues to be carefully inspected and excellently maintained. In order to alleviate the congestion caused by traffic during the busy weeks of the year, the company built a secondary truck inspection facility in Windsor, just three miles south of the bridge. Then, in 1993, a new truck inspection facility on the U.S. side were added, followed by the construction of a new Canadian customs facility and new duty-free stores on both sides. The new duty-free store is operated in partnership with the University of Windsor.

Now in the advanced planning stages are a new bridge headquarters building, a major highway information center, and better access to the main entrance.

intelligent transportation system (ITS), using advanced technologies to automate customs, toll collecting, and other procedures that will reduce

Under the guidance of Moroun, the Ambassador Bridge Company is a private company that proudly serves the public.

The positive results of the current leadership of Moroun, Stamper, and the Ambassador Bridge's board of directors are clear. Improved facilities made the Ambassador Bridge the number one international bridge crossing in North America. Nearly 10 million vehicles crossed the span in 19

The necklace of lights on the bridge's cables, which is visible at night for miles in every direction, creates a dramatic presence for the Ambassador. This is a vivid testimony to its continued vitality as the world's longest international suspension bridge.



ABOUT US

The Ambassador Bridge is a tolled suspension bridge across the Detroit River that connects Detroit, Michigan in the United States with Windsor, Ontario in Canada.

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